Transposition
Musique et Sciences Sociales

8 | 2019
Musique : patrimoine immatériel ?

Daniel K. L. Chua, *Beethoven & Freedom*

New York, Oxford University Press, 2017

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Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/transposition/2865
DOI: 10.4000/transposition.2865
ISSN: 2110-6134

Publisher
CRAL - Centre de recherche sur les arts et le langage

Electronic reference
Esteban Buch, « Daniel K. L. Chua, *Beethoven & Freedom* », *Transposition* [Online], 8 | 2019, Online since 15 September 2019, connection on 16 December 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/transposition/2865 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.2865

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Daniel K. L. Chua, *Beethoven & Freedom*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, 273 p.

1 The association of Beethoven's music and persona with freedom emerged in his reception in the first half of the nineteenth century, and eventually became a topos that, thanks to the composer's alleged sympathies and/or affinities with the French revolution, gave the concept a distinctive political meaning. At first sight, Daniel K. L. Chua's 2017 book *Beethoven & Freedom* is part of this hermeneutical tradition, which includes music criticism and scholarship. Chua repeatedly invokes contexts where Beethoven's music was performed to deliver an explicit political message, like the fall of the Berlin Wall and Leonard Bernstein's *Ninth Symphony* with *Freiheit* replacing *Freude,* or 9/11 and Leonard Slatkin's *Ode the Joy* at the Proms. In Chua's view, such events are a "testimony" to the "living presence" of the "heroic Beethoven," and a reason to believe that "its ethics of freedom will continue to speak for the epochal events of the future" (p. 23-24). There is a personal take in this: the book's epigraph is dated in 2017, in Hong Kong (where the author teaches musicology and runs the School of Humanities at the University of Hong Kong), and refers to the Umbrella Movement, the 2014 democratic social movement, brutally repressed by the Chinese Communist power. "I am conscious of the freedom I have because I can no longer take it for granted," says Chua, wishing that "may this book keep a vigil," thus making of it a contribution to political debate.

2 Despite endorsing the ethical and political claims of such music-as-message performances, Chua rejects the empirical approach that usually goes with their study, namely the historiographic method. Indeed, his whole case for Beethoven's music

providing "an experience of freedom" is built *against* reception history, and even against history *tout court*. This skepticism towards history appears in a footnote on an article in which John David Wilson addresses the relation between the opening bars of the *Eroica* and the history of the hunting topos: "Although this kind of scholarship is insightful in recovering musical conventions, it commits a category mistake if it uses the eighteenth century to explain the nineteenth century, as if an aesthetic paradigm shift had not taken place in the years straddling 1800," writes Chua (p. 75 n161), who, significantly, takes issue less with Wilson than with "this kind of scholarship," without further specification. The principal object of his attack on reception history, however, is *Beethoven in German Politics,* a 1996 book by David B. Dennis (curiously absent from his bibliography), who argued that "Beethoven the *man,* not his music, is the focus of propaganda in German politics" (quoted in p. 26). Taking Dennis at his word, Chua claims that, since reception history has nothing to say on Beethoven's music, the reason for its association with freedom must lie outside the realm of history.

3 Chua's reduction of reception history to a single book by a cultural historian with no training in musicology shows the strategic role such a dismissal plays in his overall argument. This implies not only ignoring other approaches to reception history (and this writer is avowedly not neutral in that respect), but also a certain amount of incoherence. Chua approvingly evokes Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht's 1970 *Zur Geschichte der Beethoven-Rezeption* to sustain the claim that "Beethoven's music, then, involved a kind of slow-release mechanism in its disclosure that its reception history has subsequently endorsed by revealing one constant," namely "the human" (p. 6). Back in 1970, this conservative view of the permanence of an invariable "nucleus" (*Kern*) of meaning beyond the changing "envelope" (*Hülle*) of historical contingency was severely criticized by Hans Robert Jauss, whose *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* envisioned meaning as resulting from the historical process itself. Apparently unaware of this debate, and without including Eggebrecht in his own definition of reception history, Chua takes the anti-historical train more or less where the German musicologist had left it. "The political discourses that seem to pull Beethoven's music in opposing directions are merely the overtones of a fundamental freedom that is *in* the music," writes Chua (p. 39).

4 Now, if freedom is "in" Beethoven's music, what is the proper method to show how and where? Music analysis of stylistic, rhetorical and topical traits wouldn't do that, at least not alone, if one is to avoid "category mistakes" such as Wilson's on one hand, and given the penchant of "absolute music" to behave like "empty signifiers," in Ernesto Laclau's sense, on the other. "Rather, through a mixture of analysis and hermeneutics, [the book] takes seriously the oracular claim of art" (p. 5). This implies leaving aside altogether the listening experience of real people, accessible through historical, ethnographic, or experimental psychology protocols. The empirical basis for Beethoven's music providing an experience of freedom is concentrated in the author's own experience, whose phenomenological aspect he does not describe anyway. For him, no proof is needed to assess that, while listening to the *Eroica,* "in this eternal moment, we experience our freedom" (p. 88). This rhapsodic approach to evidence is reflected in the structure of the book, whose three main sections are called "movements," rather than "chapters," to suggest their having a "musical" form, articulated "in a distinctly Beethovenian way" (p. 2).

5 Thus, rather than by history, analysis, sociology, or psychology, Chua's approach is defined by *theology*. Indeed, the author of *Beethoven and Freedom* vindicates the pertinence of theology to address issues in cultural history and the social sciences at large. Here lies what he claims to be the daring, risk-taking side of his project, as compared to established scholarly practice. Theology, he says, is the "unspeakable vortex that most scholars steer clear of in order to keep their reputations intact" (p. 8). And also: "Theology, beyond the bounds of its own discipline, is the shortest route to disaster" (p. 10). It must be said that the risk of disaster seems somehow exaggerated, if one measures it by standards such as the book's being published by Oxford University Press, with endorsements by eminent musicologists, and acknowledgements to an impressive list of "mind-shapers and shift-makers in the process of writing" (p. xi).

6 What "theology" actually means in Chua's toolbox remains unclear, though. At some point, he evokes John Zizioulas's theological ontology of personhood, according to which "the question 'Who am I?' has no answer in Western philosophy," thus making of Christianity a prerequisite to think the very notion of self (p. 200). Yet, Chua quotes few theologians, and their contributions to his argument are less than fundamental. On the other hand, "theology" allows for a proliferation of religious vocabulary throughout the book, and for a critical engagement with modern philosophy. Together with *grace,* one of his favorite words is *revelation.* "Freedom in Beethoven's music is a philosophical revelation" (p. 4). And: "So let this be a warning: Beethoven-and-freedom is a hazardous concept. It is as much a confrontation that disables thought as it is a vehicle for revelation" (p. 6). And also: "What is heard, then, in the heroic *Augenblick* is nothing less than an epiphanic revelation under modern conditions" (p. 88). Whereas "philosophical revelation" arguably leaves room for secular interpretations, the specific experience Chua's Beethoven story is about dramatically reveals itself to be no other than the revelation of Jesus Christ.

7 The Christianization of Beethoven is occasionally based on revisionist scholarship seeking to refute Maynard Solomon's classical account of his late interest in Deistic, Masonic, Buddhist and/or Hindu beliefs (p. 238 n207). Also, it relies on a view of Austrian *Aufklärung* as fully compatible with official Catholicism, contrary to the secular French *Lumières*. Yet, the same as with 9/11 or the Berlin Wall, Chua treats these historical elements in an episodic, even opportunistic fashion. His true focus is religious revelation as such. In his narrative, the alleged Christian essence of Beethoven's music is progressively disclosed, first at the end of the second "movement," where the "klagender Gesang" passage of Piano Sonata op. 110 is compared to the *Es is vollbracht!* passage in Bach's *St John's Passion*, thus reproducing Wilson's alleged "category mistake"; and again at the end of the third "movement," significantly entitled "Someone," where the Cavatina of String Quartet op. 130 "bears a close resemblance" to the *Crucifixus* of the *Missa Solemnis*, and "evokes the gaze of Christ" (p. 243).

8 Now, a tale of religious revelation needs a personification of evil to achieve dramaturgical impact. In *Beethoven & Freedom,* that role is given to Theodor W. Adorno, whose *Beethoven. Philosophie der Musik* is by far the text most quoted and discussed. As it is well-known, Adorno worked in this book for many years, without ever completing it; the volume that bears this title is a compilation of "fragments and texts," edited by Rolf Tiedemann for Suhrkamp in 1993. Chua suggests that the reason for Adorno's ultimate "failure" to come to terms with Beethoven's oeuvre, and his alleged inability to give

shape to his "philosophy of music," was none other than his atheism. This led him to perform on the music "a kind of aesthetic euthanasia" (p. 156). Yet, "Adorno's project on Beethoven was left incomplete as a series of fragments due to his self-confessed inability to grasp the disclosure of the human in the *Missa Solemnis*. Beethoven's high mass caused Adorno's philosophy of music to plunge into the abyss," writes Chua, commenting Adorno's essay *Alienated Masterpiece* in a style that echoes hagiographic literature (p. 7). And again: "The epicenter of his musical thought was shattered by the *Missa* and left in fragments" (p. 190). This assessment of failure is couched in strong ethical terms, which make of Adorno an incarnation of no other than the devil. "For all its insights –writes Chua–, to believe Adorno's Beethoven is to make a pact with the devil, couched in the logic of a negative theology" (p. 157).

9 That being said, Chua is magnanimous enough to give the devil a chance of salvation. In his reading, there is in Adorno an unspeakable fascination with theology, a secret yearn for redemption. This is consistent with his view of atheism as a form of theology, inasmuch as the question of God lies at its very center. In fact, a whole section of *Beethoven & Freedom* is entitled "Redeeming Adorno," and asks in explicit religious terms: "Can Adorno's philosophy of Beethoven also be raised from the dead?" (p. 173). But the answer is less than affirmative. After hearing "a kind of bodily resurrection" in the op. 110, the author comments: "Adorno would probably not approve such a resurrection because of what he perceives as the 'lie of religion' and the positive reification of utopian desires, but by calling on Beethoven's seemingly 'demythologised prayer' to articulate the truth he seeks to hear, Adorno inadvertently finds a *surprise* in which the composer outmaneuvers the philosopher with an abundance that is so much more than a mere semblance of hope. Beethoven's 'star' bends towards Adorno's philosophy with an unexpected gift of beauty" (p. 187). So, the Christ Beethoven offered the Devil Adorno a chance of salvation, to which this last knowingly preferred to "plunge into the abyss," thus accomplishing his devilish essence.

10 For all his provocation, Chua's use of theology to address the meaning of Beethoven's music is not new in the history of Beethoven reception. The most relevant comparison is Vincent d'Indy, who at the beginnings of the twentieth century, in the highly politicized context of the Dreyfus affair, took issue with Romain Rolland's secular view of musical heroism, and made Christian "charity" the keyword to the finale of the *Ninth Symphony* instead. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given both Chua's contempt for history and d'Indy's dubious political resonances, this reference is not included in the bibliography. Yet the two authors belong into the history of resistances to the secularization of discourses on music, including disciplinary musicology as modern scholarship. And this has also contemporary political resonances, as in Chua's epigraph on the Umbrella Movement, which clearly is *not* an endorsement of its democratic aspirations: "now that the streets are cleared and discipline reasserted –he writes–, may this book keep a vigil in quieter but darker times: may freedom find its purpose in hope, and hope rise about the clamour of protest and propaganda, and bestow peace on a city that has yet to find its home." The freedom Chua is interested in is not of this world; rather, it is the name he gives to the experience of the Christian faith.

11 This, of course, is a private belief, which nobody is entitled to judge. Yet, by going public, and to the extent that *Beethoven & Freedom* is a kind of theological statement, it challenges the established view of scholarship as a secular realm. As an answer to that challenge, it might be worth reminding that secularism founds the very possibility of

contradictory discussion based on empirical evidence and rational argumentation. Turning his back to this regulative model, Chua's final words, or rather, final letters, are written in big capitals in the middle of the page: ISDG. Their meaning is not explained, so one can only wonder if they allude, perhaps among other things, to the SDG monogram used by Bach and other protestant classical composers, to signify the Biblical *Soli Deo Gloria*, Glory to God Alone. But this esoteric ending of a scholarly book contrasts with the fact that, in contemporary societies, political discourses based on religious faith are usually the business of predicators, not of composers, nor of scholars. Unless *Beethoven & Freedom* was to be read, from a sociological perspective, as the sign that the scholar-predicator might well now count as an ordinary actor in the field of the humanities. That would be, in this writer's opinion, not far from a disaster.

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